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What influence does civil society have on the "Agenda 2030"?

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The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by the international community at a UN summit in September 2015, was defined by the Secretary-General of the United Nations as an “Agenda for people”. Its key component, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), derive from an intergovernmental process considered by some as the most democratic and inclusive in the history of the UN. But to what extent have the ten million voices of civil society^[1], collected through various participation channels, influenced the definition of the SDGs? Are we more influential when the political processes at the global level become more democratic?

Civil society can have an influence via various approaches (persuasion, blame and denunciation, boycotts), both inside and outside of the negotiation arenas. We focus here on participation channels within the negotiation arenas, particularly within the [intergovernmental Open Working Group on SDGs](#),

which has worked to define these goals between March 2013 and July 2014. During this intergovernmental process, civil society actors have delivered written and oral contributions to persuade governments to adopt all or part of their positions, and thus exert their influence, through various participation channels (face to face or web-based formal consultations, side events, bilateral meetings with government representatives). We focus here on a specific target of [the SDG 10 on income inequality](#) (target 10.1 “By 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average”), and we assess the influence of civil society on the conceptualization of the issue of income inequality in the negotiations and on the formulation of this objective. We observe that despite repeated interventions through all available participation channels, the influence of civil society remains only moderate in terms of the definition of goal 10. Firstly, civil society has failed to influence the conceptualization of the issue of income inequality as both an issue of reducing poverty and extreme wealth. On numerous occasions, coalitions of civil society organizations have called for the reduction of inequalities by targeting both the lowest and highest income quintiles, via the establishment of a progressive tax system comprising taxes on the concentration of wealth. These repeated interventions have failed to change the way governments conceived the issue of income inequality. For most, with the exception of some delegations such as Brazil, Nicaragua and Spain, reducing income inequality is first and foremost an issue of poverty reduction, while the taxation of wealth is not considered as a way to reduce the income gap between the rich and poor.

Secondly, civil society has helped to ensure the existence of certain autonomous goals in the final SDGs agreement. Following two negotiation sessions of the Open Working Group on SDGs (May and June 2014), goal 10 was merged with goal 1 on reducing poverty in the draft international agreement. Civil society actors then organized themselves into a coalition that coordinated the drafting of a declaration listing the case for an independent objective on inequality. Within 48 hours, 175 civil society organisations signed this declaration, which was then forwarded to the co-facilitators of the negotiations and to governments. This civil society intervention has contributed to the reinstatement of goal 10 in the subsequent draft agreements and the final agreement itself. However, civil society interventions have not secured the adoption of ambitious goals in relation to numerous targets. Again, SDG 10 provides us with an illustration. Firstly, the income inequality target text is weak. To *progressively achieve* and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average, still leaves room to allow income inequalities to continue to grow until 2029, before such reduction is initiated. Secondly, the target is not quantified, despite the fact that many civil society interventions called for the setting of concrete targets to reduce income inequality by a given amount per year. And thirdly, while civil society has repeatedly called for a change to the target to ensure that the gap between the 10% richest and the 40% poorest is reduced significantly, the final target ignores the highest income quintiles to focus solely on the lowest. Thus, the income inequality target could allow the greater concentration of wealth, which is an engine of inequality.

Negotiations on the SDG 10 show that the inclusion of a broad and representative sample of civil society actors does not prejudice the influence of these actors on the results of the negotiations. It is the responsibility of researchers in particular to clarify further the conditions of influence of civil society contributions, and thus to attempt to resolve this apparent paradox between democracy and influence. For further information about the SDG 10, see Chancel & Voituriez, “Taking income inequality reduction seriously: a pass-or-fail test for the Sustainable Development Goals”.

[1] Civil society includes all non-governmental and non-profit organisations (institutionalized civil

society), social movements and citizens (non-institutionalized civil society).

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